The Power of Love
Matthew 25:31-40
November 14, 1971

One of the most popular folk hymns to emerge in the church in the last decade is, "They'll Know We Are Christians by our Love". Listen to the words:

"We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord; and we pray that our unity may one day be restored.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand, and together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side, and we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

That song is sung by people across the church who have rediscovered an old, old truth; namely that there is power in love; that love is the characteristic which defines a Christian; and that love, simply, is the most lasting reality, the most dynamic force in the whole universe. The people who sing that song have laid hold of an old and ancient truth; namely, when all is said and done that which matters about a person is the degree to which he has grasped and been grasped by love.

It has been a rediscovery because, frankly, the going definition of a Christian is far more in the realm of certain external behavior patterns that have little, if anything, to do with love. I learned, as a boy, from my fundamentalist neighbors, that you could tell a Christian on the basis of how he spent his Sunday's. To them, at least, it was rather clear that anyone who doffed dungarees, sweat shirt and sneakers and went out into the alley to play basketball - or horror of horrors - who slipped down to the Olympic theater to watch Roy Rogers chase bandits and Dale Evans for an hour or two, was little better than a heathen druid. I learned also, in a Good News Club to

which these people took me, that drinking and smoking were activities that lead directly to hell; which revelation when announced to my father over dinner, resulted in abrupt termination of my career in Mrs. Hurst's Good News Club.

A turning point in my theological education came when these zealous Christians organized a petition to keep a black family from buying a home several blocks away. Something was missing here: something written so clearly in the pages of the New Testament that you have to try not to see it: something called love. So it was that I returned to the bosom of Presbyterianism after my sojourn with the fundamentalists and yet I sense that a lot of what was and is wrong with their style is still very much with us. We don't say it in the same way as they do, we are not so precise in defining those activities that are forbidden and those that are allowed; but in theory we share - on a deep visceral level - their conviction that to be a Christian means to follow somebody's rules.

Well, "they'll know we are Christians by our love" the song proposes: which is simply another way of saying, "when you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me;"or "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The crunch comes, in our time, when we talk about morality; what is right and what is wrong. In the early 60's something called the "new morality" or "Situation Ethics" exploded in our midst, and it sounded as if nothing was absolute anymore; that anything was acceptable if the situation was right; that a man could do whatever he pleased so long as he could justify it in the context of the immediate situation. That sounded like good news to a lot of people who had been doing whatever they wanted to do anyhow. But it sounded like very bad news to the people who were getting some sense of security from following the accepted Christian rule-book.

What got overlooked, of course, was that the people who were selling the

new morality were being very Biblical. The fundamentalists screamed that if nothing is ultimate then there can be no such thing as right and wrong. And they were correct. What they weren't hearing was the rediscovering of the only ultimate there really is, namely love; and that love is the final imperative with which being Christian must deal. Not petty restrictions on drinking, smoking or playing cards; not standing up at a certain time and place and getting saved; not even sexual chastity - but love. Now, before I am misunderstood let me clearly say that if love is the ultimate moral imperative, the use of another person for sexual gratification - apart from total commitment, falls into the category of sin. So does drinking when it destroys self, marriage and others. But so, also, does exploiting my employees, or my children, or my neighbors. - The point is that the rediscovery of love as the ultimate moral imperative redefined the accountability of a Christian. That's the yard stick: that's where we will be measured. Daniel Webster - a giant of a man - was once asked his greatest thought. And he replied, "My personal accountability to God." We are accountable: we will be judged: there is a right and a wrong. "Come, O blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

The New Testament makes some startling assertions about love. First, God is Love. Second, there is power in love. Let's think about them. Men have always tried to define GWd. Men have needed to put their feelings about that which is ultimate in the universe into words. And the history of theology - the history of creeds and confession - is the story of man trying vainly to confirm God within the boundries of human vocabularly. The Bible doesn't even try. It says, simply, "God is Love." Professor Paul Tillich, perhaps the greatest theological mind of our century, had the gift of simplifying what other men complicate. Listen to how he dealt with the topic:

"God's abiding in us, making us His dwelling place, is the same thing as our abiding in love, as our having love as the sphere of our habitation. God and love are not two realities; they are one. . . Therefore, he who professes devotion to God may abide in God if he abides in love, or he may not abide in God, if he does not abide in love . . . The criterion, the only criterion is love. For God is love. . ." [p. 26-27, The New Being]

Then Professor Tillich went on to illustrate what he meant by way of a story about a woman "whose life", in his words, "was spent abiding in love, although she rarely, if ever, used the name of God, and though she would have been surprised if someone had told her that she belonged to Him who judges all men, because He is love and love is the only criterion of His judgement."

"Her name was Elsa Brandstrom, the daughter of a former Swedish Ambassador to Russia . . . At the beginning of the First World War, when Elsa was 24, she looked out of the window of the Swedish Embassy in what was then St. Petersburg and saw the German prisoners of war being driven through the streets on their way to Siberia. From that moment on she could no longer endure the splendor of the diplomatic life. . . She became a nurse and began visiting the prison camps. There she saw unspeakable horrors and she, a girl of twenty-four, began, almost alone, the fight of love against cruelty, and she prevailed. She had to fight against the resistance and suspicion of the authorities, and she prevailed. She had to fight against the brutality and lawlessness of prison guards and she prevailed. She had to fight against cold, hunger, dirt and illness and she prevailed. . . . She visited the hungry and gave them food. She saw the thirsty and gave them to drink. She welcomed the strangers, clothed the naked and strengthened the sick. She herself fell ill and was imprisioned, but God was abiding in her. The irresistable power of love was with her.

After the war she initiated a great work for the German and Russian orphans.

With the coming of the Nazis she came to America and became the helper of innumerable European refugees." Tillich knew her in this work and he summarizes her life like this:

"We never had a theological conversation. It was unnecessary. She made God transparent in every moment. For God, who is love, was abiding in her and she in Him."

It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love - and this means God - is so overwhelmingly manifest. It undercuts theological arrogance as well as pious isolation. It is more than justice and it is greater than faith and hope. It is the presence of God himself. For God is love. And in every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us." [p. 26 - 29]

That's the first thing the New Testament says about love: God is love. And when we love, we are being in intimate fellowship with God. The second thing it says is that love is a power.

Now, I think we have a little trouble with that, even if we buy the idea that God is love. Power is megatonnage. Power is horse-power: power is a voting bloc, or a rifle or a phantom jet, or a naked fist. Power is the ability to act, and the ability to make other people do what you want them to do. And in our culture, only the naive assume that love is the way to go about: only fools - or in St. Paul's phrase, "fools for Christ". Because the New Testament claims, - all the wisdom and experience of the world to the contrary - that the greatest power of all is love.

Put that assertion in the context of the world as we know it. Put it in the context of power as the ability to change things and people. All the power of this nation - represented in terms of planes and bombs and napalm and half a million soldiers, have not, apparently, changed the will of the people of Vietnam. All the power of this nation, in terms of dollars and pure political muscle, could not change men's minds about the expulsion of Nationalist China

from the U.N. All the power of the state of New York, in terms of high stone walls, and machine guns and solitary confinement, failed to change criminals in Attica into responsible citizens.

Put it in the context of the world you know best: your world: your own family. I want my children to be a certain way: to do certain things: to feel certain ways: and to relate to others in a certain way. But you and I can't force that: we can pretend for a while - and get proper behavior at the threat of punishment. But the folly of that definition of power is almost too evident to become a burden.

Love is power - the only real power - the New Testament teaches. It is power to change people as Jesus did; not by harranguing them about the given ethical norms of society; not by insulting, criticizing or making them feel guilty. But by accepting, forgiving and loving. Love is power - the only real power you and I have, or ever will have.

Erich Fromm, in the Art of Loving, put it this way: (and if this sounds familiar, it's because I liked it so well we used it as a Minute for Mission last Sunday.)

"Giving is not giving up something. For the productive person giving is not being deprived of or sacrificing something. It has an entirely different meaning. Giving is the highest expression of my potency. In the very act of giving I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy."

Today is an important day in the life of this congregation. Today the members of this congregation will ask each other to make pledges of money for next year. We call it Stewardship, we do it for a number of reasons, and there are at our disposal a number of methods. We do it because this church needs to know what it will have to spend in 1972. We do it because the existence of this church program, its extension through the mission agencies of the United Presbyterian Church, is worth supporting. As we do it we can play on

guilt. We are responsible for the life of this church. That makes us feel obligated.

But this year, as we sign pledge cards, I would hope we might do so - not out of guilt or obligation - but out of a sense of gratitude and a sense of power.

We have been given our lives, our loved ones, our skills and abilities. Our money is a true extension of ourselves -- it represents everything we are. We have been given love - God's love in Jesus Christ. And we have been called to extend that love - to live new lives in God's presence because of love. As we give we exert our power: as we give we are enabled to change people and events for the better. As we give we are enabled to "tune into" the most powerful force in the universe. And as we give - we fulfill that ultimate criterion: that measure by which the world will know who we are.

They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

They will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.

Father help us to see that in giving we receive: that in loving we become fully the men you created us to be. Abide in us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.